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Resilient and agile

Making logistics a combat multiplier for GCC armed forces

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About the authors

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Executive summary



The armed forces of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are improving their capabilities in many areas, but still have relatively limited experience with actual operations. As a result, many have logistics systems that may not perform to expectations under the rigors of such operations — whether in combat or in peacekeeping or humanitarian missions that require overseas deployments. History shows that effective logistics are an important determinant of an armed force’s success or failure.

A more rigorous logistics system can act as a combat multiplier, providing operational commanders a clear advantage over their adversary through better information regarding the availability of platforms, systems, and stocks, and an ability to replenish equipment and supplies more rapidly. GCC armed forces should take specific steps to create a logistics system that is built for war but adapted for peace. These entail developing plans to support specific operational contingencies, testing those plans through realistic war games and exercises, and assessing performance to make consistent improvements over time.

Past as prologue

“There are no new lessons to learn, only old lessons to be relearned.” That saying applies to military logistics. History has proven that battles, campaigns, and even wars are won and lost due to logistics. Dating back to antiquity, armies gained strategic advantage through logistics and supply chain management. More modern examples include the Normandy landings in 1944 and Operations Defensive Shield and Desert Storm in 1990–91. Despite this historical evidence, however, some GCC armed forces have been unable to develop sound logistics, for two main reasons.

First, most armed forces in the region have limited direct experience with large-scale operational missions. Prior engagements have often been in conjunction with coalition partners, which have handled much of the logistical planning. As a result, GCC armed forces have supply chains, organizations, and other logistical elements that cater primarily to peacetime activity and, when necessary, can be adapted for war or other operations.

Second, GCC countries have tended to use their large defence budgets, among the most generous in the world, to build up stocks and assets as a solution to logistics constraints and bottlenecks. When a difficulty arises, logistics commanders attempt to throw money at it and use civilian peacetime resources and capacity to recover.

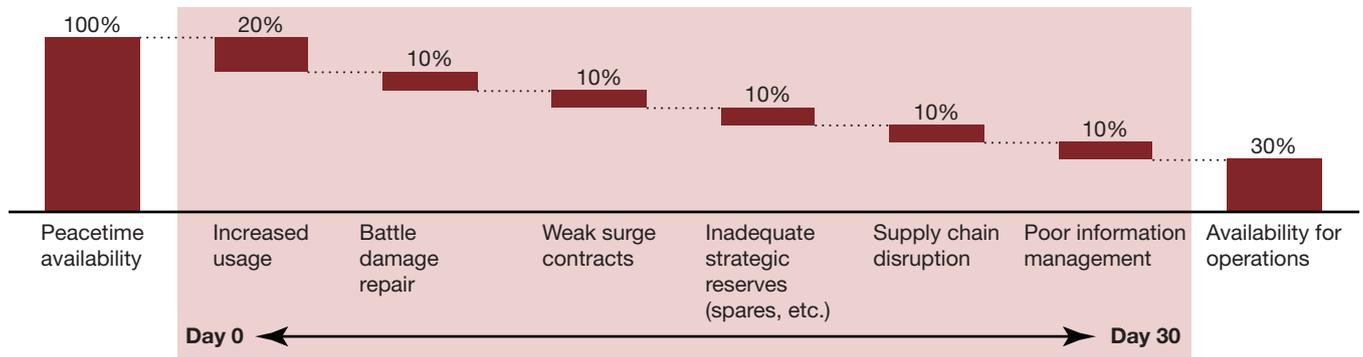
The difficulty with this approach is that organizations, processes, and systems built around a peacetime standing can mask deficiencies that leave armed forces unable to sustain their soldiers during high-tempo military operations. When armed forces have not had direct experience of large military operations, such as those launched independently without the benefit of coalition partners, a commander can be lulled into believing that a force with ample peacetime assets will be able to access and move them to where they need to be once combat starts. However, the experience of armed forces in other regions shows this is not the case.

Experience shows that even when a commander’s strategy and tactics are sound, inadequate logistics systems can rapidly degrade available assets once an operation starts. Common problems such as increased

usage, inadequate strategic reserves, a disrupted supply chain, and poor information management can reduce logistics availability by as much as 70 percent in the first 30 days of intense conflict (see Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1
Intensive operations can reduce logistics availability

Decrease in Asset Availability During Operations

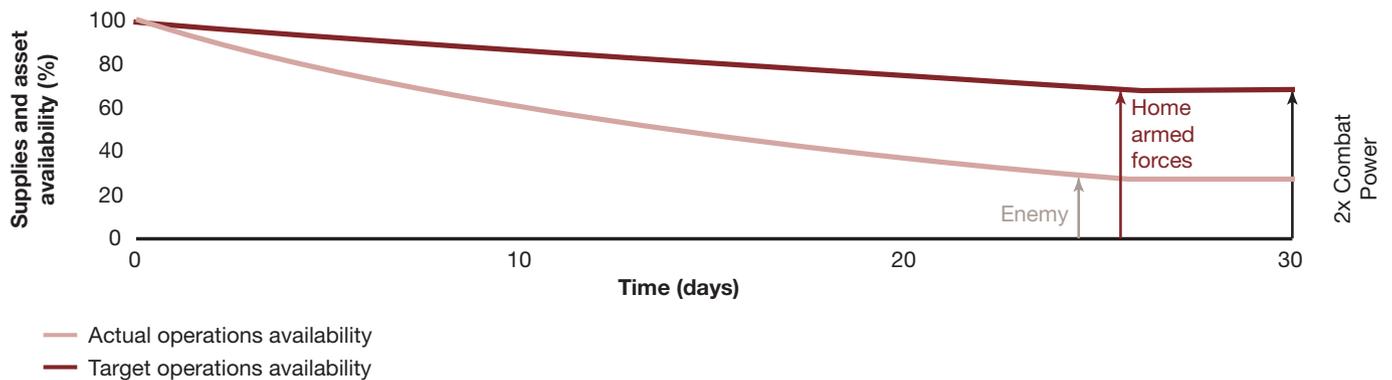


Source: Strategy&

However, deliberate steps by armed forces to improve their logistics system can increase the availability of stocks, platforms, and systems, giving these force an overwhelming operational advantage (sometimes to the scale of two times in terms of relative combat power) over their adversary (see Exhibit 2).

Exhibit 2
Strong logistics can provide an advantage against an adversary

Supplies and Asset Availability During Operations Relative to Those of Enemy Forces



Source: Strategy&

Five foundational elements of resilient and agile logistics

The message for GCC military leaders is clear. As modern operations become more complex and demanding in terms of resilience and agility, leaders need to reform their logistics systems to be able to sustain operations and provide commanders with a logistical edge over the adversary. This requires a change in mind-set from viewing logistics as a mere supply function that coordinates procurement, to a perspective that understands logistics as a partner and a source of operational advantage. Under this new mind-set, logistics leaders can weigh in during the planning stages of an operation regarding its feasibility and potential risks. More critically, they can ensure that assets are in the right place, assess military plans for using those assets, and accurately indicate how a particular operation will potentially degrade their capability.

To build a strong logistics system, GCC armed forces should focus on five foundational elements:

1. *A logistics system designed for war and adapted for peace*

Rather than using daily, peacetime operations as the standard, commanders should turn their approach around. They should design a logistics system for war, and then scale it back to the degree possible during peacetime. They must estimate the demand for critical supplies and equipment (with reasonable accuracy and foresight), to ensure that the armed forces can sustainably meet that demand. Moreover, they should use this forecast surge demand as their baseline for logistics.

2. *A lean and flexible logistics organization*

Organizations should be able to flexibly adapt to peacetime and to war because of the tremendous difference either makes to an armed force's needs. For example, during an operation, military leaders may send in a force that can sustain itself for one to two weeks. After this, the force will need to replenish key supplies. Rather than a "push" approach to logistics, in which headquarters sends out supplies based on predicted demand, units should be able to "pull" the specific stocks they need, based on actual consumption. This logistics model differs from the peacetime one, and organizations should be able to move between the two as needed.

3. *Effective information management*

As forces become more complex and leaders have a wider range of military options available to them, information itself becomes a critical asset — a concept known as information superiority.¹ From a logistics perspective, forces that have a better view of supply stocks and the real-time status of military assets provide themselves with clear advantage over their adversaries.

Similarly, some complex assets and platforms are able to generate information about their own status. For example, tanks, aircraft, and other platforms can automatically report their status to centralized IT systems. They can also proactively report maintenance conditions that will soon require repairs, and even check on the availability of the spare parts required. That kind of real-time status gives commanders improved insight regarding the capabilities of their forces, both during peacetime and on the battlefield. Accordingly, GCC armed forces need to invest in IT systems with which they can gather and synthesize data regarding the location, volume, and status of supplies and assets, and securely present that information to commanders.

4. *A flexible skilled workforce*

Certain roles are needed in far greater numbers during operations, when certain peacetime roles become redundant. For example, peacetime roles in logistics planning and administration typically need to shift to intelligence, planning, and execution during operations — with a new schedule that provides 24-hour coverage in headquarters. Through the right training and proper manpower planning, organizations can ensure that their people possess the different skills required and can be deployed accordingly. In addition, forces should determine the appropriate use of contractors to develop a more flexible logistics workforce.

5. *A responsive supply chain*

GCC armed forces can follow the lead of private-sector companies and improve their supply chain practices, including building adequate redundancy and the ability to track assets accurately using technology.

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The centrality of planning and performance management

Once the foundations of a sound logistics system are in place, commanders should develop plans for specific operations. Deliberate contingency planning and preparation during peacetime can help reduce friction and uncertainty in wartime, especially because operations typically stretch logistics headquarters and units to their limits. Specifically, armed forces should have operational scenarios in place that outline their response to the situations they are most likely to face — for example, an airborne threat, a deployment or support for a multinational peacekeeping force, or humanitarian aid relief in response to a natural disaster. Each operational scenario should have a corresponding logistics plan that outlines the supplies needed to support operational units, along with a means to replenish supplies. Critically, these plans should be based on surge demand, rather than the peacetime baseline.

In addition, effective performance management can improve the technical readiness of armed forces. Performance management entails continuously monitoring and stress-testing the supply chain and other logistical elements. This is achieved through running fully-fledged exercises and training, identifying bottlenecks, and then systematically removing them to allow the proper volume of supplies to flow rapidly. A structured, continuous-improvement process will enable the armed forces to consistently improve their performance over time, and ensure that critical assets are available when needed.

Learning from independent operations

Relatively young armed forces that had considerable experience in coalition operations recently launched an independent, multforce operation. The mission required a rapid deployment with little time for planning or reconnaissance. This placed immense pressure on the logistics function, which scrambled to react quickly yet still became a bottleneck in the operation, leading to uncertainty for operational commanders.

Based on this experience, these armed forces revamped their logistics function, which led to five key lessons for other militaries in the region:

1. Set up a dedicated information section that can provide a logistics database for planning purposes.
 2. Develop procedures for logistics reconnaissance before deploying forces, including specialists in the operations area who can identify available location resources and supplies, coordinate the reception of incoming forces (including transportation and accommodation), and create contracts for goods and services.
 3. Negotiate host nation support agreements in peacetime to support operational contingency plans (with the participation of specialists at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels).
 4. Establish a single entity responsible for all aspects of logistics command and control, which directly oversees a permanent team that plans for logistics contingencies.
 5. Establish a multinational joint logistics centre for homeland operations, which can speed allies' deployment on home territory and can streamline their access to local capabilities and facilities in the event of an emergency.
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Conclusion

If GCC armed forces are to join the ranks of the world's best and participate effectively in coalition forces, they will need to improve their capabilities in logistics. As history shows, logistics are a critical determinant of success on the battlefield. There are clear practices that lead to improved logistics performance, which commanders can learn from other armed forces and from private-sector operations. At the core of these practices is developing plans to support specific operations, testing those plans through realistic scenarios such as war games, and systematically making improvements to problem areas. By changing their mind-set and investing the time, capital, and leadership to improve logistics capabilities, commanders can give themselves a critical advantage on the battlefield.

Endnotes

¹ Mark Jansen, Hugo Trépant, Abdulkader Lamaa, and Andrew Suddards, “Achieving information superiority: Five imperatives for military transformation,” Strategy&, 2014 (http://www.strategyand.pwc.com/media/file/Strategyand_Achieving-information-superiority.pdf).

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